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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: VERHEUGEN OFFERS STRONG SUPPORT DURING TURKEY VISIT, DESPITE CONCERNS

Classified By: Classified by Deputy Polcouns Charles O. Blaha; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: During an intense September 4-9 visit to Turkey, EU Enlargement Commissioner Verheugen stressed his support for opening accession talks with Turkey in 2005, even stating flatly in one meeting that the EU will set a date for talks at the December Summit. However, Verheugen also warned that some other EU commissioners are less supportive of Turkey, and the Commission's October Progress Report on Turkey will reflect a consensus view. Verheugen privately warned PM Erdogan and Deputy PM and FM Gul against pursuing legislation that would criminalize adultery, and then went public with this concerns when his warning went unheeded. Though Verheugen consistently praised GOT human rights reforms, he also called for further progress and pointedly told one interlocutor that Turkey remains far behind the 10 new EU member states in human rights. Erdogan and Gul pledged to continue the reforms after starting accession talks. Verheugen said he is concerned about possible Greek Cypriot opposition to Turkey's EU candidacy, though the Cyprus issue should not influence the EU decision in December. Most NGO leaders and representatives of non-Muslim religious communities said they favor the opening of accession talks, despite Turkey's human rights shortcomings, though one NGO president claimed there has been no progress on torture. End Summary.

Upbeat Verheugen Gets Warm Reception

2. (C) Asif Amin, DCM at the Danish Embassy; Thomas Bagger, political and press counselor at the German Embassy; and Sema Kilicer, political officer at the EU Representation to Turkey, all told us they had never seen Verheugen so positive about Turkey, nor Turks so positive about Verheugen, than during this visit. Verheugen made it clear to Erdogan and Gul that he personally favors the opening of accession talks in 2005. He supports the inclusion of a strong recommendation to that effect in the EU Commission's October Progress Report on Turkey. However, he warned that some commissioners are not supportive of Turkey, and the report will reflect a consensus view. (Note: Kilicer (please protect) told us that, based on the portions of the draft report she has seen, it will include a mix of positive and negative information, leaving it up to the EU Council to interpret. End Note). He also promised his Turkish interlocutors across the board that the EU will make a firm decision in December, ending the uncertainty that has long surrounded Turkey's candidacy. Verheugen was greeted warmly by the Turkish public; aside from an anti-EU demonstration by nationalists in Izmir, there were no signs of the suspicion noticeable during previous visits. This was especially true in the southeast, where local residents displayed signs welcoming him in several languages, including Kurdish, and sought to kiss his hand. Kilicer speculated that this rock-star treatment may have gone to his head; by the end of his visit he was less cautious in his statements about what the EU will offer Turkey. Verheugen assured trade union representatives in Istanbul September 9 that, while he cannot say so publicly, the EU in December will definitely set a date to begin accession talks.

Verheugen: Turkey Lags Behind New EU Members

3. (C) At the same time, Verheugen made clear that Turkey will have to continue improvements in human rights reforms, particularly regarding religious freedom and implementation of reform legislation. Turkey has made spectacular progress in recent years, he said, but still falls short of EU standards in some respects. Erdogan and Gul accepted this, and even averred that they need the EU to maintain pressure on Turkey to give them political cover to continue the reforms. They asserted that the EU Commission report on Turkey should be clearly positive, in light of the progress made. Anything less will be deemed unfair by the Turkish public, and will complicate further progress. The reforms are overdue and in Turkey's interest, and the GOT will continue them after starting accession talks. During the trade union meeting, Turk-Is Confederation President Salih

Kilic argued that the EU should have long ago opened accession talks with Turkey, and asked why the 10 new member states jumped the line ahead of Turkey. Verheugen, according to Kilicer, gave a blunt reply: "Do you really want to know? In the 10 new member states, minority rights are protected, people have the right to use their mother tongue, torture is not tolerated, and there are no destroyed villages. Don't ask me to compare Estonia and Hungary with Turkey."

Adultery Ban Is "Political Dynamite" in Europe

14. (C) According to Amin and Bagger, Verheugen told EU heads of mission in Ankara September 6 that he would discuss the GOT's proposed legislation criminalizing adultery only in private (Note: See septel for report on legislation. End Note). While the matter is not part of the Copenhagen Criteria and is officially unrelated to Turkey's candidacy, Verheugen said the idea of criminalizing adultery smacks of Islamic law (Sharia), and contradicts the Western concept of a modern state. He called the issue "political dynamite" and said it has done grave harm to Turkey's image in Europe. Shortly after Verheugen raised the issue in private with Erdogan, the PM made a public statement vowing to press ahead with the legislation. That prompted Verheugen to go public September 9, telling the press, among other things, that the legislation "can only be a joke." Kilicer told us it is unclear whether criminalizing adultery would violate the European Convention on Human Rights. The Council of Europe has informally determined that such legislation could violate Article 8 of the Convention, which protects the right to respect for private and family life. Amin said Dutch Ambassador Gosses will meet with Gul to warn him against pursuing the legislation.

Greek Cypriots Could Be Spoilers

15. (C) Verheugen told Erdogan and Gul that Cyprus will not affect the EU's decision in December, which is the EU's official position. However, he acknowledged to EU ambassadors that he is concerned about the potential role of the Greek Cypriots as spoilers. Nicosia has been inflexible in its opposition to EU efforts to relieve the isolation of the TRNC, and has lately been making disturbing noises indicating Turkey should be required to fully recognize the Republic of Cyprus in order to open accession talks. Verheugen repeatedly criticized the Greek Cypriots throughout his comments, drawing the ire of the Greek Ambassador. Verheugen said the October Progress Report will note the presence of Turkish troops on Cyprus, but will offset this with reference to Turkey's support for the Annan Plan.

Minority Religious Leaders Favor Accession

16. (C) Verheugen told leaders of the non-Muslim religious communities in Istanbul September 9 that they have an important role to play in helping the EU determine the state of religious freedom in Turkey. European Christian Democrats, in particular, are keenly interested in the status of Christians in Turkey. Several religious leaders outlined the problems they face due to the fact that their religious institutions lack legal standing. Representatives of the Greek and Armenian Orthodox churches said they continue to face difficulties in their efforts to attain legal ownership of church properties, despite reforms designed to ease restrictions (Note: See septel for detailed report on property issue. End Note). According to Kilicer, the religious leaders disagreed on a number of issues relating to the nature of their problems, but stressed uniformly that they favor the opening of accession talks, which they believe will lead to further reforms. "We didn't come here to cry on your shoulder," Monsignor Louis Pelatre, Latin Vicar Apostolic Bishop of Istanbul, told Verheugen. "There are problems here, but we love Turkey."

NGO: Torture Remains "Systematic"

17. (U) The majority of NGO leaders shared that support for accession talks in their meeting with Verheugen. But Yavuz Onen, president of the Human Rights Foundation (HRF), caused a stir by claiming HRF statistics indicate an increase over last year in torture, which he believes is still "systematic" in Turkey. Verheugen countered that he believes torture remains "widespread" but is no longer "systematic" (Note: This is our conclusion as well, as reflected in the Human Rights Report over the past couple of years. End Note).

Comment

18. (C) Verheugen's interactions during an intense week in Turkey reveal the complex currents surrounding Turkey's EU candidacy. Like many observers, both internal and external, Verheugen is inspired by the GOT's impressive reforms, which he wants to encourage. At the same time, his concerns about the adultery legislation and his comments about the differences between Turkey and the 10 new EU member states demonstrate that he is aware of the distance that still separates Turkey from the Western democracies. The warm greeting he received in the troubled southeast reflects the desperation of Turks who see the EU as the only hope for relaxing the restrictions imposed on them by a rigid, overbearing State.

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